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ABSTRACT

Writing style is a personal characteristic that emerges over a period of time as a writer studies his work. Although in this sense style may not be taught, it can be encouraged through the formation of teacher/student relationships and the establishment of successful writing communities. In addition, composition teachers can facilitate the development of style through commentary focusing on student self-knowledge of the assumptions and goals present in their writing. Similarly, optional assignments, the establishment of a class audience for writing, the postponement of grading to allow for revision, and evaluation based on content as well as form and mechanics can all contribute to the development of self-confidence and personal style. (KS)

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Self-Knowledge, Self-Confidence and the Teaching of Style

John Hagaman

Many composition teachers, buried under a stack of student papers to be returned in the morning, have wished for a set of rubber stamps imprinted with such advice as "Not a sentence," "It's = it is," and "I before e except after c." Desireability fades, however, when we read of a professor proudly asserting in The Chronicle of Higher Education she needs only one stamp: "Wrong."[1]

Unfortunately, too many composition teachers have taken this negative approach. "Writing teachers have been saying, 'Wrong! wrong! wrong!' when they should have been saying, 'Right! good! keep going!' even if they said it about only one word in a paper," writes Ken Macrorie.[2] Writers at all levels need readers who listen and try to understand them. Such relationship often free the writer, especially the student writer, from self-doubt and concentration on what his readers expect, to discovery of what he has to say. Such relationships often help build the self-confidence and knowledge many students need to write forcefully in their own voices.

Of many writing skills self -knowledge and confidence influence (and are influenced by) style is one of the most central. If all writing is self-expressive, one view of style is the creation of a writer's self or selves. "The

CS 202 709

style is the man," writes Buffon, or qualifies Robert Frost, "' . . . the way the man takes himself."[3] It makes sense a writer who knows and believes in himself is likely to have more success creating a style than one who does not. But there is more to explore here.

A second, equally important concern is defining our roles in teaching style. Style is a personal matter that emerges over a period of time as a writer studies his writing. And yet, if style is the man, can't teachers help students discover more about themselves? Two of the most basic ways style can be taught are by the formation of personal relationships with students and the establishment of successful writing communities.

In using the term self-knowledge I do not mean a self that is fixed and unchanging, self-knowledge producing mere arrogance. The knowledge of self I mean stems from acknowledging we have many selves, each in a state of flux. Perhaps they could be grouped into two large categories: the rational and the emotional. If this is possible, then James E. Miller in Word, Self, Reality describes the relationship between these selves I mean: "To know what we think, we must know how we feel. It is feeling that shapes belief and opinion. It is feeling that directs the strategy of argument."[4] Self-knowledge is making connections be-

tween the rational and emotional, the abstract and concrete, the inner and outer worlds. A person who does this has a sense of where he's coming from and where he's headed, but is open to change along the way. This knowledge is gained sometimes by self-examination, and frequently, through relationships with others. As Martin Buber has written, "I discover who I am through exploration of all relationships of my experience, for I am created only in the experiences of those relationships."[5]

Despite gaps in knowledge of self, as well as awareness of personal failings, confidence arises. The person knows he is more than that he appears before any single audience, even more than just a summation of his appearances. He realizes his uniqueness, and accepts the uniqueness of others.

Theoretically, a writer who knows himself is likely to have more success creating a style than one who does not. Yet, at one time or another, most of us have created persons in writing different from the ones we intended. We may have created persons different in personality from our own, perhaps ones whose insight and force surprised us. Rather than growth in the writer having the potential to affect style, style has the potential to affect growth in the writer.

Sometimes, the emergence of style precedes our conscious awareness of it. Perhaps a writer needs to heed Hamlet's advice, "Readiness is all," as he examines

what he thinks he knows of himself, and discovers what he may be in his writing. W. H. Auden, among others, acknowledges the unexpected writers should watch for when he writes, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"[6]

Basically, style is or should be, at some stage, a conscious activity. For some, consciousness may exist from the start. Awareness of one's assumptions and goals as well as those of the audience helps a writer determine what assumptions and attitudes need projection to communicate successfully. Awareness and use of concrete experience when discussing abstractions help others give fullness and credibility to the person conveyed. Ken Macrorie would say such writers speak "some kind of truth" since they have made a "connection between the things written about, the words used in writing and (their) real experience in the world (they) know well."[7] For still others, style may be conscious only after the first draft is completed. In the revision stages these writers pay careful attention to choices of diction, sentence structure, and organization to create a desired tone. At this point, confidence may help writers emphasize active rather than passive verbs, or strong rather than weak, and delete unnecessary qualifiers to create a sharper, more distinct voice.

I picture the relationship of self-knowlege and style as an ascending spiral or gyre without Yeatsian connotations. We create a style because of who we are,

and in the process, discover aspects of ourselves we didn't know existed, which then alter us and our writing. We are alternately conscious and unconscious, distinct from and a part of our writing. Our style happens; we make it happen. If we are ever growing, ever expanding selves, the spirals we create should continue indefinitely.

What is a teacher's place in such a model? Some writers would say we have none. H. L. Mencken has written:

> A style is always the outward and visible symbol of a man, and it cannot be anything else. To attempt to teach it is as silly as to set up courses in making love.[8]

Truman Capote implies agreement in a 1958 Paris Review interview:

> . . . I don't think that style is consciously arrived at, any more than one arrives at the color of one's eyes. After all, your style is you.[9]

e.e. cummings suggests we have done more harm than good in teaching style:

> To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing it best, night and day, to make you everybody else - means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.[10]

These men tell us our jobs are to stay out of the way of the writer, searching for himself and his style. How might we do this? Perhaps,first, we can avoid requiring all students to write on the same specific assignment, and instead, create options. Haven't our students told us they write best when they write what concerns them most? If a student wants to write a number of

papers on the same subject, he should have the chance, as long as he is exploring new aspects or depths of it. Second, we can avoid being the sole audience for student writing. Writing consistently for the teacher, or any single audience, may slow growth in person and style. The class itself is a ready-made audience. Third, we can avoid grading and accepting a piece of writing as finished the first time it is submitted. Writing, like personal growth, is a process as much as a product that only deadlines stop. Why not allow time for growth to occur?. Fourth, we can avoid reading papers solely for form and mechanics, and instead, emphasize their effects on content.

If style cannot be taught, we can make students more aware of their styles and encourage growth. If we agree with Macrorie,

> Most students are not my equal in experience or knowledge of literature and writing. But in some aspects of each they may be my superior. I will never know until I let them bring forth themselves full of their experiences and ideas and feelings, as they are forced to let me bring forth myself.[11]

then we need ask ourselves how students can be actively encouraged to "bring forth themselves." If style is not mere ornament, but the writer himself, then James E. Miller has sound advice: "To effect change in style means to effect change in the self or to release or deepen or discover it."[12] As a catalyst for change, the writing teacher needs more than a background in composition, rhetoric, and linguistics. He needs to be a student of human behavior as well.

Carl Rogers' description of qualities needed to facilitate learning strikes me as essential for composition teachers encouraging students to "bring forth themselves." We should listen to Rogers at a time when correctness and prescription seem to be taking precedence over content, and students are disparaged as poor writers and thinkers.

In Freedom to Learn Rogers writes, " . . . the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner." These qualities are 1) realness in the facilitator; 2) prizing, acceptance, and trust of the learner by the facilitator; and 3) empathic understanding.[13] We should practice what we preach; if we want fresh, honest writing, we should be ourselves with students both in person and in comments we make on papers. We should prize and accept our students as we prize and accept ourselves. We should understand our students from the inside and meet them at least halfway. We should show that the channels of communication are open, and help students assume their share of the responsibility in keeping channels open.

Our function in the spiral I described before is to mirror or "resonate" the persons students create in writing. In my office and on papers I try to describe without evaluating the kind of person I see created. I note variations within a

paper, and compare voices created in different papers.

I might comment, for example, "I hear the speaker here more loudly than in your last paper. He believes what he says and makes me respect him. There is an anger and intensity here I haven't seen before." Or, perhaps, "The speaker is confused at this point. He contradicts himself, and seems to take the easy way out; he goes on to assert his point without qualification."

I have heard some teachers say, "My students have no voices." Whether public or private, strong or weak, no paper, no student is voiceless. Some will be more audible to us than others, perhaps because the writer had a different audience in mind than teachers when he expressed himself. When I hear teachers say their students are voiceless, I hear them saying they are unable to hear, or worse, they choose not to hear. A problem exists: if writers aren't made aware of their voices, how can they enrich and vary them?

If we have listened to our students, when an individual loses himself in abstraction, we can remind him of his concrete experience which allowed him to conceptualize in the first place. When he says he has nothing to write about, we can recall earlier conversations about what he said mattered to him. When he doesn't question his assumptions, we can ask, "Is <u>this</u> what you mean? or <u>this</u>? or <u>this</u>?" When he loses sight of his audience and we are tempted to say his voice

is voiceless, we can reinforce the bonds that exist among men; we can reinfoce universal concerns that run deep. "What's worth writing about?" "What are you telling your audience that's going to matter to them? to you?" When he hesitates to tackle a subject that interests him, but is too great a challenge, we can listen and encourage. In all of these instances we encourage honest writing, we tell the student we value his ideas and experiences, we say "put yourself into your writing."

Yet ultimately our students have to do without us, because we are only second best for what they can do best themselves, and must when the course is over. We have been their listeners and questioners, and at the end of the course, inescapably, their evaluators. They must be careful listeners, questioners, and evaluators of their own writing, and life-long students of their own styles. The process we enact must be internalized.

Our success in teaching style - teaching the individual to teach himself - is seen in the kind of writing community we help establish. If we have listened to and valued our students, they listen to and value each other. They may disagree with each other, but they will respect the others' rights to see things their way. The class and not solely the teacher is the audience for writing. When papers are read aloud, students interpret what is said before giving honest

evaluation. They develop a sense of each other as persons and writers.

Take an imaginative teacher I know. At one point in Freshman Composition she has each student read his paper aloud as the class sits blindfolded in a circle. The class tries to identify the student, his tone of voice, and features of the paper characteristic of the writer. Since the teacher has made a practice of reading papers aloud, she finds students usually can characterize consistencies, as well as differences in the persons conveyed.

A successful writing community insures a variety of responses are given. It illustrates that each of us sees the world from a slightly different perspective, and that each view has some validity. It reinforces the writer's need to listen to others but above all, to listen to himself. It teaches the student to teach himself and to trust what he discovers. He is his own best advocate, his own best critic.

Teaching style in this manner is an affirmation of the person and his ability to know himself. If, as Carl Rogers asserts, our students are to be "ever changing, ever developing, always discovering (themselves) and the newness in (themselves) in each succeeding moment of time,"[14] then we need to tell them regularly, "Right! good! keep going!"

Footnotes

[1]Loretta M. Shpunt, "Diary of a Mad Freshman-English Teacher, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1 March 1976, p. 32.

[2]Ken Macrorie, as stated in textbook publicity for Hayden Press, 1976.

[3]As quoted in Barnet and Stubbs, Practical Guide to Writing (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), p. 286.

[4]James E. Miller, Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.,1973)pp. 53-4.

[5]Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1958), pp. 28-9.

[6]W. H. Auden, "Squares and Oblongs," Poets at Work, Rudolf Arnheim, et al. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), p. 174.

[7]Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing (New York: Hayden Book Co., 1970), p. 5.

[8]H. L. Mencken, "On Style," A Mencken Chrestomathy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 460.

[9]Truman Capote, Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 296.

[10]e.e. cummings, E.E. Cummings: A Miscellany, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Argophile, 1958), p. 13.

[11]Ken Macrorie, Uptaught (New York: Hayden Book Co., 1970), p. 177.

[12]Miller, p. 189.

[13]Carl R. Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning," Freedom to Learn (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Co., 1969), p.106.

[14]Carl R. Rogers, "The Goal: The Fully Functioning Person," Freedom to Learn, p. 295.